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TITLE: Soliciting Sex on the Internet: What are the Risks?

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES: Little is known about sexual contact initiated via Internet communication and less is known about the sexual risk behaviors of people who meet through Internet venues. We are observing chat room conversations on sites targeting men who have sex with men, heterosexuals and "swingers", i.e. heterosexual couples interested in exchanging partners or in group sex. Our objective is to collect qualitative data on the nature of Internet-initiated contact and the process by which a contact evolves into a potential sexual partnership, with special attention to HIV/AIDS risk behaviors. These data will be used to implement an Internet based survey designed to quantify this sexual risk behavior.

METHODS: Using a participant observation methodology, we systematically document the content of conversations occurring in chat rooms on sites targeting the above-mentioned populations. Each chat is observed for 30 minutes to 2 hours per session at varying times of the day, evening and weekend in order to document variations in theme, content, and topics of interest. Observers do not participate, but document as much information about chatters as is available, reference to sexual risk behavior, and any indications that chat may result in face-to-face meetings. To date we have completed 34 observations across 8 sites; of these sites, 2 targeted gay men, 3 targeted singles, and 3 offer chat rooms for gay men, singles and swingers alike.

RESULTS: Preliminary results indicate there may be important differences with regard to the potential for risk behavior on sites targeting gay men compared to sites targeting heterosexuals. Chatters on sites targeting gay men frequently disclose sexually explicit and inviting personal information in their "profile", a mechanism to introduce individuals to all chatters. Many heterosexual oriented chat profiles include names only, although some also include solicitous information. There is evidence that chat sites may be used as a venue to meet people for sexual encounters. Of the chat sites observed so far, data suggest gay sites offer more opportunities to meet for sexual encounters compared to heterosexual sites and gay, heterosexual and swinger sites all offer opportunities for "cybersex", i.e. sexually explicit conversation.

CONCLUSIONS: The Internet is being used to solicit sexual encounters among persons who may be at risk for HIV or other STD. Whether these sexual encounters involve safer sex behavior is still unknown. More observations are planned as well as an online survey to gather risk data and document individual experiences with sexual encounters and risk behaviors via Internet initiated contacts.

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